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Intercultural challenge to language learning

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research project set to investigate the piloting process of an innovative language program for university students. It challenges traditional English language teaching courses celebrating a view centered on learning; classes become spaces for students to understand the language they are learning through the development of small projects. The approach moves from a teaching transmission paradigm to one where the most important agent is each student who has to engage with a topic of his or her interest. Students are seen as individuals whose knowledge and understanding of the world is valued and not as people whose lack of language skills prevents them from engaging in discussions of complex topics. The objective of this innovation is to enhance students' understanding and use of academic English in their field of interest. In this project, we argue that knowledge and understanding of the mother tongue and culture play key roles in the development of a second language. A number of studies suggest that students who had strong first language literacy skills achieved higher proficiency levels in their second language. Based on this argument and Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, we designed disciplinary content language learning workshops for first-degree students. The main tenet is that students can develop academic English given that they know about their discipline. Findings so far reveal the difficulty of students to take distance from their previous learning experiences. They also show that students' ideas expressed in English are far more complex than what would be expected of them given their second language skills. The complexity is not only related to the

content, but to the way they construct their paragraphs and the understanding of how the register of their field may be used.

Keywords: heteroglossia, second language learning, previous experience, intercultural

Intercultural Challenge to Language Learning

Second language learning is a topic of interest around the world. Institutions are challenged to help students reach proficiency levels to deal with academic content in English. However, the success of language learning programs is still a problem area in many educational settings (Byun, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim, & Jung, 2011; Chen & Goh, 2011; Robinson, Rivers, & Brecht, 2006). The situation in many Mexican universities, public and private, is not different from findings in reports of other countries (Davies, 2008, 2009). Tertiary Mexican institutions have taken up the challenge, offering students general English language courses: classroom-based instruction designed to help students master the second language. The results of the strategies implemented in the institution where we work coincide with Davies' results; most students do not reach a level of proficiency that allows them to learn sophisticated academic content in English. This situation also reduces their access to job opportunities or postgraduate programs that require an advanced level of English. Based on the evidence presented by Davies and the experience at the University of Guanajuato, where we have worked for a number of years, as language teachers, teacher educators and researchers, we designed a series of workshops as an alternative approach to language learning. The objective of this paper is to present findings of the research carried out during the pilot process of the proposed workshops. We begin the discussion by clarifying the differences we find between traditional language learning approaches and the innovation presented. And then we proceed to present some of the learning outcomes.

One of the tenets that support traditional English language learning environments is a need to first acquire enough knowledge about the language to access the possibility of transferring academic abilities developed in the first language; a process I refer to as cross-linguistic transferability of academic abilities. This approach to language learning assumes that students' lack of knowledge about the language needs to be tackled first for students to be able to use background knowledge. A metaphor that comes to mind is that of the student as an empty vessel that needs to be filled to become a literate language user. Students are positioned as deficitarian individuals rather than as people with a wealth of

knowledge. Such knowledge could be used as a platform to develop further cognitive and social understanding, and abilities. In this second perspective one of the objectives of learning processes would be to establish the basis for a confident student self with capacities to discuss, analyse, and develop personal views and express them in the second language they are learning. In traditional settings it is the teacher who defines what aspects of language students need to learn before they can engage in more complex tasks. From our perspective, the students come to realise where they need better language skills to understand their texts and to express their views. When only teachers are considered as owners of knowledge while students become subordinates, this vertical relationship celebrates the perpetuation of hegemonic views by those in power; in the classroom the teacher represents this position. Furthermore, students' capacities to use their previous knowledge to support the learning process of the second language is not necessarily compromised; often, they do not require engaging with the language to levels that go beyond superficial use of linguistic forms and limited understanding of vocabulary. That is, learning the second language often remains at the level of coding and decoding; actions that are linked to views of literacy as the ability to read and write, but which do not necessarily involve deep understandings of social meanings. Moreover, it seems to suggest that all students have the same needs and learn at the same pace; all of which are established by objectives dictated and determined by programs and followed by teachers.

Pang and Kamil (2004) suggest that literate second language students may not understand or know about second language cultural and literacy practices; but they have probably developed complex literacy skills in their first language. Geva and Verhoeven (2000) and Koda (2005), among other scholars, have investigated this cross-linguistic transferability and they conclude that children apparently transfer L1 skills to their L2 abilities when they are given constant opportunities to raise their awareness of the differences between the two languages; however, as children become older, and maybe as part of the pedagogy used at school, they seem to lose awareness of those differences. The ideas of these authors are based on Cummins (1979, 1984), who maintains that there is an interdependence between the development of the first language and that of the second one establishing a complex relationship between both languages. Cummins (1979) contends that exposure to the L2 and motivation are necessary for language skills to transfer from L1 to L2. Cummins based his contentions on studies of children learning a second language. Verhoeven (1994) studied immigrant children in the Netherlands finding similar correlations. Other researchers (Sparks, 1995; Sparks & Ganschow, 1991, 1993, 1995) have also found different levels of interdependence between L1 and L2 and proposed the linguistic coding difference hypothesis proposing that "both L1 and L2 learning

depend on basic language learning mechanisms that are similar to both languages . . . on observations of college students who had demonstrated histories of difficulty with L2 learning (e.g., students classified as learning disabled) . . . early findings indicated that weak L1 learners appeared to have particular difficulties in specific aspects of their L1" (Sparks, Ganschow, & Humbach, 2009, p. 205). The interdependence of L1 and L2 has been found at different linguistic skill levels, in a variety of contexts as well as from varied research approaches (Dufva & Voeten, 1999; Durgunoglu, Nagy, & Hancin-Bhatt, 1993; Holm & Dodd, 1996; Meschyan & Hernandez, 2002; Olshtain, Shohamy, Kemp, & Chatow, 2005, 2006; Proctor, August, Carlo, & Snow, 2006 to mention but a few) strengthening initial arguments.

Cummins' interdependence hypothesis can be analyzed from Bakhtin's (1981) point of view on the dialogic heteroglossic nature of language. According to Bakhtin (1981), heteroglossia involves "a struggle among socio-linguistic points of view, not an intra-language struggle between individual wills or logical contradictions" (p. 4). This view decenters knowledge about the language, and centers on sociocultural and discursive processes that are constantly challenging learning processes as previous experiences shape our understanding of the present. This position contests the view of unitary language needs in a classroom defined by programs and teaching objectives, and enacted through teachers' pedagogical views. In line with this view, Vygotskian ideas of the social development of cognition (Wertsch, 1985), where interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogues are key factors, would support the interdependence hypothesis posed by Cummins. Vygotsky wrote ". . . cultural development appears on the stage twice, on two planes, first on the social plane and then on the psychological, first among people as an intermental category and then within the child as an intramental category" (as cited in Greenfield, 1984, p. 117).

Based on this, the interdependence of both languages may be said to involve first social interaction with others where the heteroglossic nature of the individual discursive life is enacted and then the intramental process that leads towards the construction of our understanding and appropriation of reality triggering the development of higher mental functions.

One of the implications of supporting a learning approach on these views is that the meaning of literacy goes beyond coding and decoding. Street (1997) discusses literacy in terms of "social practices associated with reading and writing rather than psycholinguistic conflicts . . ." (p. 45). He further explains

. . . the term "New Literacy Studies" (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1996) represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to

think of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1985). This entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power. NLS, then takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking "whose literacies" are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant. (p. 77)

Ideologically, Street's conceptualization of literacy opens the door for a context-based and sensitive approach to the construction of literacies. Furthermore, it allows us to think of alternatives where power can be exercised horizontally rather than vertically following a learning centered approach where students may lead the processes involved. Under this view, teachers and students share the learning responsibility. Learning establishes opportunities for dialogical understanding and recognizes the heteroglossic nature of our discursive experiences. It further acknowledges the inter and intramental processes that the development of higher mental functions defined by Vygotsky involves.

The Workshops

Based on the ideas discussed above and Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, we designed disciplinary content language learning workshops for first-degree university students. Knowledge and understanding of the mother tongue and culture play key roles in the development of a second language; these are important arguments for the proposed English workshops presented in this article. The main tenet is that students can develop academic English given that they know about their discipline; by the time students enrol in the workshops, they have read extensively in their first language to develop some level of understanding about their discipline. Such experience has probably served as scaffolding for complex literacy skills in their L1. Considering that the content of the workshops is based on the students' disciplinary area, their motivation may trigger a positive attitude towards learning a L2.

The approach of the innovation involves moving from a teaching transmission paradigm to one where the most important aspect is for each student to engage with a topic of his or her interest. Additionally, students are seen as individuals whose knowledge and understanding of the world is valued and not as people whose lack of language knowledge prevents them from engaging in the discussion of complex topics. The objective of this innovation was not only to learn about a second language, but also to enhance students' understanding and use of academic English in their field that would lead them to acquire a second language to a level that would open doors for future studies and professional careers.

This paper presents the findings of the qualitative research project set to investigate the piloting of this initiative, an innovative language program for university students that challenges traditional English language teaching (ELT) courses. It celebrates a view centred on learning; classes become spaces for students to understand the language they are learning through the development of small projects related to their disciplinary area.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand the challenges involved when teachers and students confront a learning space that challenges previous learning and teaching experiences. Following a contention that reality is socially constructed, the research stance taken to understand the piloting process of the English workshops is qualitative. This approach has enabled the researcher to give voice to participants; this position allows for the emergence of themes that otherwise would be hidden from the naked eye, supported by the assumption that reality is complex and dynamic. As such, and as Holliday (2007) explains, it is necessary to look at the research within a specific context and draw boundaries of its social setting. There is recognition of the researcher's subjectivity throughout the development of the research project where a detailed narrative of the process is necessary to ensure its rigor.

The specific research questions that led this study were:

1. How do students experience a program that challenges a transmission model of education?
2. How do teachers experience a program that is based on learning rather than on teaching?

The focus of this paper is on the first question.

Given the research approach used for this investigation, and the fact that it is an unfinished research project, we have not analyzed data to provide quantitative information. This does not mean that we do not consider such data important; it is a pending objective. At this stage, the stance we have taken has enabled us to unravel the complexity involved when individuals encounter learning situations that challenge previous experiences.

Research participants. Five teachers (1 man and 4 women) and 16 students (10 women and 6 men) from five first-degree programs within the university served as participants in this study. Four programs fall within the social science and humanities division, while the fifth one belongs to the hard sciences area.

Of the 5 teacher-participants, 2 are teachers and teacher trainers with over 20 years of experience while the other 3 are English teachers whose range of

teaching experience is between 6 and 10 years. All of them are highly qualified in language teaching and accepted the challenge of becoming part of the project. One of the teachers, however, dropped out of the project after the first semester.

The 16 student-participants were all enrolled in the workshops to cover the language requirement to finish their BA/BSc program. None of the participants can be considered true beginners as they had taken English classes in secondary and high school. They were all given the Quick Oxford Placement Test (QPT) and their levels ranged from high beginning to low intermediate. The QPT is a grammar based test that proved to be a useful discriminatory instrument.

For ethical reasons, teachers' and students' names have been changed or concealed.

Data collection and analysis procedures. All teachers working as workshop facilitators were invited to participate in this study; to date, they are the only ones that have piloted them. Each teacher, after accepting the invitation participated in semistructured, in-depth interviews conducted by the researcher over a period of two years. In addition to the interviews, a number of nonparticipant classroom observations were made in three of the six schools to gain greater understanding of the piloting process. Two of the teachers also kept a journal of their daily experiences within their classroom. Data were also gathered through two focus groups with 2 teacher-participants. Student-participants were also invited to participate and after accepting the invitation they were interviewed by the researcher and also by their teachers. We also observed classes and students' presentations. Students' reports, journal entries and glossaries have also been used as data.

Data analysis involved a constant comparative framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We began building a set of categories that represented the teachers' and the students' experiences. From there, we constructed two main themes that comprise the categories found in the initial analysis. The researcher discussed the categories with three teacher-participants to corroborate her interpretation.

The themes that emerged from the data analysis problematize previous teaching and learning experiences as well as teachers' pedagogical identities; students' and teachers' resistance towards an innovation that involves breaking away from their comfort zone in the classroom seems to threaten individuals. The second theme relates to the linguistic complexity of students' work.

Findings: Data Analysis and Discussion

In this section we first present findings concerning students' resistance towards the workshops. Then we present evidence of the complexity of their

written work and their use of different voices.

The piloting process began in August 2010. Two teachers, the researcher and one of the teachers, started working with science undergraduate students. After this initial group, the workshops have been piloted in three different venues by three teachers. For teachers and students, it was the first time facing an approach that challenged previous teaching and learning experiences. One of the first issues students highlighted was the use of a textbook. They constantly expressed a need to follow a book. A second aspect they questioned was how they were to develop projects linked to their discipline if they did not know enough about the language. Students never complained about their knowledge or understanding of their discipline, though. In our opinion, students' knowledge about their discipline is considered by students a given capital.

Students' resistance towards the workshops varied as it happens in any classroom. However, how resistance was enacted showed not only differences, but the complexity of students' realities and beliefs, as evidenced by the following November 2011 excerpt from the researcher's journal:

While waiting for the teacher to arrive, a group of students asks me who I am and what I am doing there. I explain that their teacher had invited me to observe their project presentations. A few seconds were enough to hear comments about their experiences, agreeing or disagreeing with the workshops. One of the students said that he disliked them; he said that it was impossible to learn anything because he first needed to learn vocabulary and grammar to function in a second language. Another student was all excited and enthusiastic, but nervous, as her team would be the first to explain and present their project to the group. She said that even though developing a project was difficult and time consuming, she liked it because it was the first time she could discuss topics that were interesting and linked to education, her field of study, in English.

While this excerpt shows different positions towards the courses, it also portrays two different views about language. One where knowledge about language seems to be the key to liking the workshops; a second view suggest a challenge but also some sort of reward. Even though the second student does not explain the difficulties she found, once we were in the classroom, some of those challenges became visible. When she presented her project, she struggled with pronunciation; she managed to explain (not read), in broken English, a series of Piagetian ideas that were the basis of her project. While this was happening, the student that apparently disliked the course was distracted and kept distracting other students. The teacher encouraged the group to ask questions, a few students did and got answers from the students presenting their project to the group.

The following excerpt seems to indicate that the student positions himself as subordinate and the teacher as the one in power with capacities

that apparently define the student's actions; a vertical enactment of power between teacher and student. In an informal conversation in June 2011, the student that was not paying attention said: *"I don't like the workshops, the teacher doesn't teach. I have to do things that should be done by the teacher and I don't know how I'm going to pass [the course]."* It may be the case that the student's lack of interest is a way to resist the challenge posed by the innovation as it questions previous experiences. Furthermore, it suggests that for this student teaching involves depositing knowledge (Freire, 2004) as a static commodity. The student's resisting attitude towards an innovation calls for responsibilities that have probably not been part of his educational experiences. From a Bakhtinian point of view and thinking of discursive positions where language defines or produces spaces (Doecke, Kostogriz, & Charles, 2004, p. 32), the student's struggle may be conceived as heteroglossic, a constant struggle between centripetal and centrifugal discourses:

The centripetal forces of the life of language, embodied in a "unitary language" operate in the midst of heteroglossia. At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word . . . but also, and for us this is the essential point, into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, "professional" and "generic" languages, languages of generations and so forth . . . Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward. (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 271-272)

Centripetal discursive forces are represented by monoglossic learning experiences where language is standardized and has fixed meanings that teachers deposit. These problematize centrifugal forces that resist unified views of language, which would mean engaging with the language beyond structural levels. This creates a space of struggle where on the one hand there is a celebration of the differences and complexity of language learning processes influenced by previous experiences, individual differences, interests, motivation, and so on. In other words, centripetal and centrifugal discursive forces are the sites of the struggles created by students' traditional language classes and their experiences within the workshops.

An example of this struggle seems to be represented by the topic chosen by a group of students. These students developed a project on verb morphology in English. During their presentation they explained that before they could start using the language, they needed to understand its morphology. When questioned about the reasons why such knowledge was necessary to use the language, one of the participants said that if a student does not understand how

the language works and where it comes from, meaning etymologies, a learner cannot use the language appropriately. The group explained that in junior high school they had begun learning the rules and now they were trying to go deeper into their understanding of the linguistic system.

Another student wrote in his journal: *"Today in my English class I felt bad because the new form of work is confused for me [sic]"* (Luis' journal, May 2011). During an interview, a third student said: *"I want classes, normal grammar classes. Maybe two hours of grammar and one for the workshops"* (Interview, June 2012). The evidence shows the struggle that changing the educational paradigm involves; student's experience involves states of confusion and desire to go back to grammar based learning environments that are apparently seen as the normal way of learning a language; a conflicting heteroglossic position where monoglossic grammatical discourses and heteroglossic linguistic experiences compete. A space where "meaning-making lies on the inter-discursive and inter-textual borderline and appropriating these social discourses and text is a complicated struggle and ideological activity" (Doecke et al., 2004, p. 34).

Even though students' perceptions at one point in time differed, in the large body of data we identified patterns that suggest that students' views tend to change. While many of them strongly resist the innovation the first time, during their second semester, they seem to take a different stance, their views seem to change: *"Throughout this project, I was involved more in the team work and of course, on the topic at hand [sic]"* (Lola's journal, September 2011). *"The activities in group benefic my learn [sic] in English because we worked in different activities [sic]"* (Ramiro's journal, October 2011). *"I have learned more than just English. Now I know how to make reference to the sources I use for my papers"* (Interview, June 2012). These excerpts suggest how students acknowledge having learned a number of things. While there are grammatical inaccuracies, the evidence apparently portrays a dynamic meaning-making process. Working collectively seems to be of value to these students; for example, the focus of their learning appears to go beyond linguistic gains. Such meaning-making process involves modifying attitudes and learning more than language: *"In this class I felt a change in my attitude, I noticed that if I try to say things in English is very easy for me [sic]. My classmates and I like [it]"* (Students' comment after class October 2011). *"I think that this form of the class is very interesting because I will can learn bests but I will can more responsibility [sic]"* (Luis, November 2011). These data excerpts may be interpreted as a constant interplay of discursive forces that generate conflict between them as different voices and contrasting perspectives mingle. Students move from positions where the emphasis is on learning about the language and teachers transmitting knowledge as part of their previous experiences, to spaces that invite them to think about what they know and what they want to say.

The struggle also seems to place learning more than a second language in the center of their experience; they appear to learn about becoming responsible for their learning process, learning academic skills, and valuing group work. In other words, the experience "stretches their repertoires as language users" (Doecke et al., 2004, p. 35). They combine experiences from the past with those of the present; experiences and knowledge from the classroom and experiences and knowledge beyond the classroom. From a Bakhtinian position, their conflicting views are the evidence of the dialogical nature of their polyphonic discourses.

The possibility of stretching repertoires as language users may represent the transferability of linguistic abilities described by Cummins (1979, 1984), Geva and Verhoeven (2000) or Koda (2005); a dialogical process of making sense of the difference between different literacies. This suggests the development of complex literacy skills that go beyond linguistic coding and decoding, that is the development of nontraditional definitions of literacies that involve a more complex view of language and literacy.

Students' experiences take place within spaces where tensions apparently involve a reconceptualization of what learning and teaching mean as they participate in dynamic social systems (Lemke, 1993). It is within dynamic social spaces, which are part of social systems, where struggles to come to terms with a different type of classroom that challenges beliefs, previous experiences as first language users and as language learners, take place. Coming to terms involves understanding different cultural linguistic practices, not only in the students' first language, but also in the second language they are learning.

The experience, as mentioned above, also involves learning to value group work. Working with peers apparently represents a learning opportunity. Group work has probably enabled students to engage in discussions where interpersonal dialogues created opportunities to develop higher thinking abilities through intrapersonal dialogues.

Even though students' previous experiences as language learners involved learning about the language, the workshops led them to see learning spaces differently. It was not a place to fulfill only the objectives set by a program or a teacher, but a space that opened up opportunities to learn about themselves and how others may be part of their individual learning processes. The evidence suggests that the proposed approach enables students to enter a process of critical thinking that first resists moving away from comfort zones, to then value opportunities to learn about themselves, integrate knowledge about their discipline to the learning process of language use that is not isolated from relevant aspects involved in academic discourses, such as the use of reference conventions, different written genres as will be presented below.

The evidence presented and this discussion lead us to think that the

level of engagement with the language and the learning process that the workshops seem to promote enable students to develop an understanding of a second language at discourse level rather than sentence level. This challenges many of the discourses promoted by ELT where the emphasis is on learning about the language at structural and functional levels. In other words, the celebration of monoglossic views of language where learning is apparently conceived as a process of homogeneous understanding.

Initial analysis of students' writings. As this research project is in progress, in this section we present our initial understanding of students' written discourse. It may sound odd to include something in an article that is in the early stages of analysis. However, the evidence we have found, even at this early stage of analysis, is of relevance to the discussion on how students experience the workshops. While the above discussion shows how problematic the process appears to be for some students, there is also evidence of the value of collaborative work and its impact on students' learning at levels that go beyond linguistic knowledge, and their written discourse shows awareness of different genres and their use.

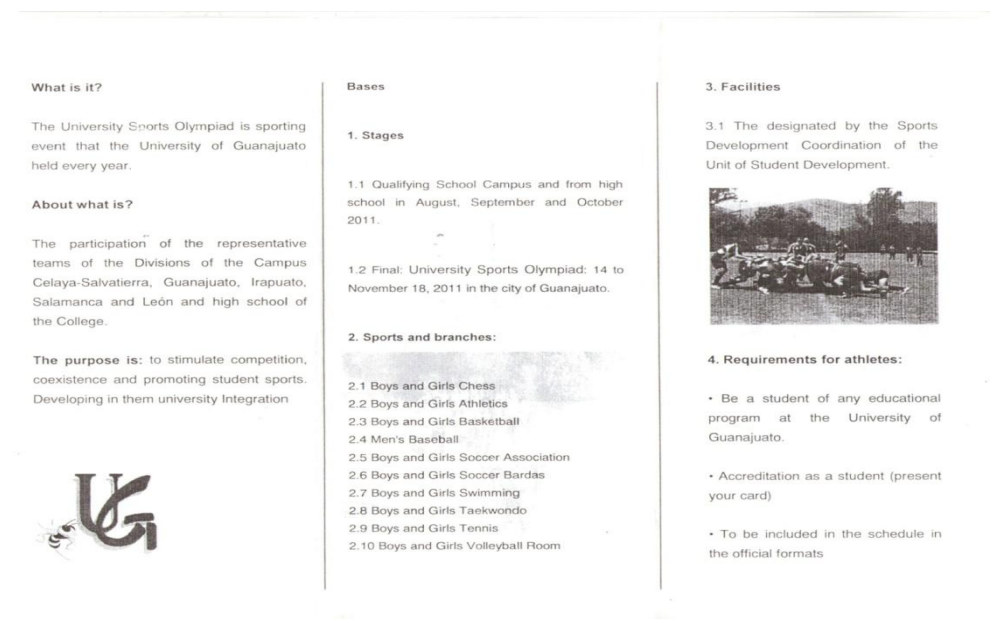


Figure 1 Sample of a handout designed by a group of students whose project was to create a flyer

Even though we are still in the process of analyzing students' writings, findings so far show that, while most of them think that they do not know enough English, they can express ideas in English. So far we can say that ideas, in most of the written

documents we are analysing, are complex, as in the example in Figure 1. When these documents are compared with the compositions students have to write in a traditional English course, students appear to focus on content rather than form. There are grammatical mistakes that, at times, hamper understanding; however, most of the times, it is possible to understand what they are trying to convey.

Evidence shows that students' understanding involves differentiating between genres, journal writing and academic essays. A student from the first semester workshop wrote the following two excerpts: *"The independent work is good because it lets you take control of your academic activities. The development of an academic activity, independent work allow students to practice it, work as they wish and at their own pace"* (Introductory paragraph from first essay, 2011). *"This is the first day of the English course 4, still do not know, how it will conduct the class in this subject . . ."* (Journal entry at the beginning of his first semester in the workshops, 2011). These excerpts are written in broken English, but it is possible to understand what the student wants to say. The first example is part of the introductory paragraph of the student's first essay. The second example is an excerpt from the student's journal. The examples represent two different genres. The second one is a clear portrait of the student's feeling of uncertainty towards the language class. The first excerpt, on the other hand, explains the student's understanding of independent work. The discourse is impersonal and the student manages to detach himself from the subject.

These students seem to understand that a different genre involves different ways of using the language, something rather sophisticated when one thinks about a second language learner within a traditional language classroom. It may be premature to say it, but there is an apparent transfer of L1 academic linguistic abilities to the L2. Students seem to use their L1 resources and understanding to organize their ideas for at least two genres. Linguistic choices are context dependent and the evidence suggests that while writing their journals, they are talking to themselves. On the other hand, the discourse of their essays suggests that they take distance and use not only their voice, but also that of the authors they refer to. Students' understanding of L1 discourses could be the basis for the transference of those abilities as they also seem to know that:

In every community there co-exist different regional and social group dialects, different historical usages, different modes of speaking associated with interest groups, age-groups, genders, ideological points-of-view, etc. Social semiotics identifies, with Bakhtin, both the ideational and the value-orientational relations among these different social voices (Lemke 1988a, 1989 1990b, in press; Thibault 1989). Each sub-community constructs a different reality by the views it formulates in language on any matter, and it constructs its views always and only from a particular social position of interests and values vis-a-vis other possible or actual views. (Lemke, 1993, p. 4)

Understanding that different genres imply using the language differently suggests a basic comprehension of how linguistic differences within a text represent not only different voices, but different communities where certain discursive practices are accepted while others are not (for example, formal vs. informal language). This suggests that meaning making involves writing as a socially meaningful activity; that is, the context where certain piece of writing delves must be thought as part of a context. It is not a matter of only practising linguistic structures. Rather, it seems to be a matter of understanding social practices within different communities. Such communities, from a sociocultural standpoint, are context and culture bound. Moreover, looking at this phenomenon from a Vygotskian developmental perspective, the value of collaborative work may be as a mediation tool to develop such understanding (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). In terms of Halliday's views,

people use language to create meanings within their social and cultural context . . . L2 learners must learn the new contexts they are likely to encounter in using the L2 as well as the new types of content that are expected in these new contexts. (Dixon et al., 2012, p. 34)

In other words, evidence suggests that the value of interaction which students explain as collaboration changes not only the role of the teacher, but also the objectives of the learning process. The learning process involves much more than knowledge about linguistic systems; there seems to be a need to bring into the learning setting opportunities for each individual to find effective ways of communicating in different contexts and for different purposes.

Conclusion

In this article, we have tried to explain our understanding of how students experience learning English through a series of workshops where content about their disciplinary area is at the core of the activities they need to develop. The stance taken involved looking at language learning from the perspective of Vygotskian views of cognitive development where interactions with peers are key to those processes. We have also explained that the focus of the workshops is on learning rather than on teaching. Students' previous experiences are problematized. The problematic nature of students' experiences was explained through Bakhtin's ideas of the heteroglossic nature of language. Students' struggle apparently involves a process of adjustment that involves resisting the change of power positions when they realize that they have to be in charge of their learning process. Despite the mistakes or errors found in stu-

dents' work, data suggest that students' understanding of English goes beyond the correct use of the language at sentence level. There is evidence of a process that involves using at least two different written genres, essays and journals. We need to continue our investigation to better understand the processes triggered when students and teachers engage in learning-teaching processes that challenge previous learning and teaching experiences.

In light of the current findings, there are a number of implications for the language classroom and for teacher formation processes. One of them would be the problematization of a number of current views about language within ELT discourses. Are we mainly fostering superficial and mechanical language learning? Is the classroom conceived as a space where ideas are more important than language correctness? If this were the case, then it would be necessary to deeply analyse teacher formation processes and how these may be reifying superficial and mechanical language learning, where students are not given opportunities to engage with the language at deeper discursive and meaningful levels. Another question arises: Do teachers understand the difference between a stance that focuses on teaching and one that focuses on students learning?

There are pending issues related to this research project. One of them has to do with statistical data analyses. This would provide relevant information regarding the group that would strengthen the findings presented so far.

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